

Film Writer Ring Lardner Jr. Dies; Blacklisted During McCarthy Era

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Ring Lardner Jr., 85, a blacklisted film writer who won Academy Awards for the sharp-tongued romance "Woman of the Year" in 1942 and "M*A*S*H," the searingly satiric 1970 tale set during the Korean War, died of cancer Oct. 31 at his home in New York.

Mr. Lardner was the last surviving member of the Hollywood 10, a coterie of writers blackballed from moviemaking during the McCarthy era. The 10 included Albert Maltz, Dalton Trumbo, Samuel Ornitz, John Howard Lawson, Herbert J. Biberman, Adrian Scott, Lester Cole, Alvah Bessie and Edward Dmytryk. The latter was the only one eventually to inform on other Communist sympathizers.

Mr. Lardner's stinging encounter with the House Committee on Un-American Activities in October 1947 would bring him a year's jail sentence, the loss of his film studio contract and 15 years of working in film and television without his real name.

Refusing to divulge his Communist sympathies to the committee chairman, Rep. J. Parnell Thomas (R-N.J.), Mr. Lardner said: "I could answer the question exactly the way you want. But if I did, I would hate myself in the morning."

Upon his jail sentence for contempt of Congress, Mr. Lardner told *The Washington Post*, "There is only a minor difference of degree between forcing a man to say what his opinions are and dictating what those opinions should be."

He later would elaborate: "Forced confessions, or disavowals, were what the committee was clearly demanding, and I felt it was an abuse of the legislative function that needed challenging."

Mr. Lardner served his sentence at a federal prison in Danbury, Conn. Ironically, Thomas also was at Danbury, having been convicted of salary fraud.

In 1987, he received a civil liberties award named in his honor by the Fred R. Zimring Foundation.

Four decades earlier, Mr. Lardner was among the most prominent screenwriters in Hollywood and reportedly earned \$2,000 a week under contract at Twentieth Century Fox.

The first time his real name was used after the blacklist was for the 1965 Steve McQueen poker drama "The Cincinnati Kid," co-written with Terry Southern. A film critic for *Newsday* wrote that the movie "does for five-card stud poker what 'The Hustler' did for pool—raises it to an art form."

His most important film remains "M*A*S*H," based on Richard Hooker's novel about a clutch of unsteady medics who cope with the constant presence of death by pulling

pranks on their superiors. The film, which was directed by Robert Altman and which reportedly earned \$23 million, saved the then-struggling Twentieth Century Fox—a few decades after the studio fired Mr. Lardner. It also became the basis for the long-running television show.

His last credited film was "The Greatest" (1977) starring Muhammad Ali and based on the boxer's book "I Am the Greatest."

Mr. Lardner published a memoir in 1976 titled "The Lardners: My Family Remembered." Since the early 1980s, he concentrated on writing books. His first novel was started while in prison, "The Ecstasy of Owen Muir," a semi-autobiographical work rejected by numerous U.S. publishers before being printed in 1954 by Jonathan Cape in London. He also wrote "All for Love," the story of a scientist who invents an aphrodisiac to seduce a beautiful woman, published in 1985.

Ringgold Wilmer Lardner Jr. was a Chicago native and one of four sons of legendary humorist Ring Lardner Sr., the author of the classic collection of baseball stories "You Know Me Al."

He entered Princeton University in 1932, a year after his father died, but soon abandoned his studies to travel around the world. In the Soviet Union, he stayed on at the University of Moscow, where he found what he regarded as a socialist haven far removed from the Depression back home.

He returned to the United States in 1935 and, through a connection, landed a position at David O. Selznick's then-new film studio in California. He did rewriting work on such film milestones as "A Star is Born" and "Nothing Sacred." He

would later work on the detective classic "Laura" in 1944.

In the early 1940s, he collaborated with Michael Kanin on an original script that became his first major success, "Woman of the Year." Katharine Hepburn reportedly so loved the script that she removed the novice writers' names and was able to get \$100,000 for it, then the most ever paid for an original script.

In the film, which made Hepburn and Spencer Tracy a popular film team and largely defined their screen personas, she played an icy political commentator. Tracy was a low-key sports reporter.

During his early years in Hollywood, he remained active in Marxist study groups as well as the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League and Citizens Committee for the Defense of Mexican-American Youth. He served in the Army Signal Corps during World War II.

He contributed to several films that addressed social consciousness, including the animated short "The Brotherhood of Man" (1943)

and the wartime drama "The Cross of Lorraine" (1943) starring Tracy.

He also wrote such popular fare as "Cloak and Dagger" with Gary Cooper and "Forever Amber," which starred Linda Darnell and was based on the best-selling novel about sexual intrigue in Restoration-era England.

In August, the Writers Guild of America restored Mr. Lardner's name to his scripts from the blacklist era, including "The Big Night," a 1951 film starring John Drew Barrymore.

His marriage to Silvia Schulman, a former secretary to Selznick, ended in divorce.

Survivors include his wife since 1946, Frances Chaney, the widow of his war correspondent brother David; two children from his first marriage; a son from his second marriage; and two stepchildren.